Narratives of Secularity in 20th-Century India

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Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, undivided British India saw a politically fractious and ultimately violent and bloody resolution to the question – 'What is a nation?' Mirroring the Westphalian model, this political resolution came in the form of the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the creation of two nation-states in 1947: India with a secular constitution and a Hindu majority population, and the Islamic state of Pakistan with a Muslim majority population. The Indian National Congress (hereafter, Congress), which led the movement for national independence, became the dominant national party in independent India. Although, after its independence from British colonial rule, India was declared a secular republic, the term 'secularism' itself was introduced very late in the official rhetoric of the Indian polity and constitution.[1] The trauma and bloodshed caused by the Partition, where thousands of Hindus and Muslims killed each other in the name of religion, aided in hardening a political discourse in post-colonial India, where 'secular' came to signify the universal homogeneous category of the citizen, and 'communal' referred to any form of communitarian politics based on religion. At the same time, this discourse also reflected what has been called, "liberalism of fear",[2] where constitutional rights are not assumed to be given equally to every citizen. Rather, this kind of liberal politics actively seeks proper constitutional and institutional measures to safeguard the citizens from the fear of "abuse of power and intimidation of the defenceless."[3] These concerns

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1   See Akeel Bilgrami, "Secularism, Nationalism, and Modernity," in *Secularism and its Critics,* ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History 1890–1950* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008).

2   Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Political Liberalism: Variations on a Theme,* ed. Shaun P. Young (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004).

3   Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," 155.

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Indian constitution imbued with multicultural values

gave the Indian constitution a multicultural inflection such that protection of minority religious communities through constitutional and cultural safeguards became a defining feature of Indian secularism. For instance, it provided the possibility to argue that changes in the personal laws of minority religious communities could only be brought about when these communities were themselves 'ready' for them. In contemporary Indian politics, it is this idea of protection of minorities through constitutional and cultural safeguards which has been increasingly attacked by the Hindu Right as 'pseudo-secular'. The right-wing groups in India see them as preferential policies of multiculturalism that have inhibited the development of the idea of a universal identity of citizenship and a common national culture.

In order to understand how a certain political discourse – reflected in the cultural and socio-political sphere through 'Nehruvian secularism', 'Gandhi-Nehru tradition', 'unity in diversity', and *sarva dharma sambhava*' (equality of all religions) – became dominant and even a defining feature of Indian secularity in the first two decades after independence (1950s to 1970s), I shall re-trace the socio-political history in the subcontinent by delving into religion, state, and society relationship. Following the recent statements by Marian Burchard and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr,[4] and Florian Zemmin,[5] in this companion entry I shall use the phrase 'narratives of secularity' to underline not just the conceptual, cultural, and institutional differentiation between religion and secular in the 20th century, but to also highlight it as a 'historical category'.[6] In the paragraphs that follow,

Narrativising secularity

we shall see that, as a historical category in a secularity narrative, the lines between religious and secular are contentious and contingent,[7]

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4   Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, "Revisiting the Secular: Multiple Secularities and Pathways to Modernity," *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 2 (Leipzig University, 2017).

5   Florian Zemmin, "How (Not) to Take 'Secularity' Beyond the Modern West: Reflections from Islamic Sociology," *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 9 (Leipzig University, 2019).

6   Zemmin, "How (Not) to Take 'Secularity' Beyond the Modern West," 7.

7   Zemmin, for instance, argues that this contingency depends more upon socio-political circumstances, rather than on cultural resources or religious dispositions. Zemmin, "Secularism, Secularity and Islamic Reformism," in *Companion to the Study of Secularity,* ed. HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" (Leipzig University, 2019), 11. www.multiple-secularities. de/publications/companion/css_ zemmin_islamicreformism.pdf.

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such that there are dominant and recessed narratives, legitimate and delegitimised narratives. Narrativising secularity will help shed light on how the dominant political discourse in the 20ᵗʰ century was deeply imbricated in the language of secular nationalism,[8] electoral politics/group-rights,[9] and religious diversity.[10] These may be considered the three reference problems that the Multiple Secularities research seeks to identify.

Already in the 19ᵗʰ century the effects of colonial modernity were beginning to be felt in society as modern state processes and colonial governmentality fundamentally altered the nature of religion in the Indian subcontinent.[11] By the mid-19ᵗʰ century, the outlines of a colonial version of the modern state could be seen in areas such as statistical accounting, a modern organisation of the military, introduction of new systems of taxation and revenue collection, and reforms toward a modern bureaucracy.[12] While what constituted religion itself underwent a change with the emergence of 'modern religions'[13] as systematic theological doctrines, the enumeration process introduced by the

Reference problems: secular nationalism, electoral politics/group-rights, and religious diversity

Religion, state and society in the 19ᵗʰ century

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8   For an argument about how secular nationalism in colonial India was redefined as secularism in post-colonial India, see Akeel Bilgrami, "Secularism, Nationalism, and Modernity."

9   For a detailed discussion on how the discourse of secularity was entangled with the question of representative politics in colonial and post-colonial India, see Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism*; Shabnum Tejani, "Defining Secularism in the Particular: Caste and Citizenship in India 1909–1950," *Politics and Religion* 6 (2013); Rochana Bajpai, *Debating Difference: Group Rights and Liberal Democracy in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

10 For further discussion on how the language of secularity in post-colonial India is imbricated with the issue of religious diversity, see Marian Burchardt and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities," *Comparative Sociology* 11 (2012).

11 In their writings, scholars like Bernard S. Cohn and Nicholas B. Dirks have highlighted the imbrication of colonial knowledge with colonial rule. They have shown how technologies of colonial governmentality, like enumeration and representation, encouraged the view that castes and religious communities were separate, distinct, and reified groups. Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

12 Sudipta Kaviraj, "Modernity, State, and Toleration in Indian History: Exploring Accommodations and Partitions," in *Boundaries of Toleration,* ed. Alfred Stepan and Charles Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

13 For further discussion on modern religions, see Nandini Chatterjee, "Introduction," in *The Making of Indian Secularism: Empire, Law and Christianity 1830–1960* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

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colonial government altered traditional identities like caste and religion from 'fuzzy' to 'enumerated' communities.[14] The first census of 1872 classified Indians according to their caste and religious identity and stimulated conditions for stable, homogenous, and distinct religious identities. Religious enumeration, therefore, created the possibility to delineate communities in terms of 'majority' and 'minority' in the socio-political sphere. In colonial institutions of representation, minorities defined in religious terms, and later caste and racial terms, were the most prominent groups recognised for the purpose of representation.[15] Thus, in its attempt to expand electoral representation based on group-based representative politics, the colonial state triggered the political consciousness of various communities, such as the Muslims and the Depressed Classes,[16] as separate and distinct groups. As more Indians were incorporated into the representative institutions of the British Raj through carefully measured doses of nomination and election, representation of important and distinctive group interests became the hallmark of colonial constitutionalism.[17] Thus although, in the aftermath of the great rebellion of 1857,[18] the British colonial power declared non-interference in the private realm of 'religion', and 'custom',[19] its policies in the 19th century ensured that precisely these concerns remained crucial in the public and the political sphere.[20]

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14 Sudipta Kaviraj, "Religion, Politics and Modernity," in *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India*, ed. Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (New Delhi: Sage, 1995), 299.

15 Rochana Bajpai, *Debating Difference*, 32.

16 The ex-'untouchables,' as the lowest members in the caste hierarchy, suffered several injustices and atrocities in society due to the practice of a caste system in India. They were designated as 'Depressed Classes', and later as 'Scheduled Castes' by the colonial government. The decennial censuses carried out by the colonial government brought together myriad caste groups into a single all-India category of Depressed Classes and created the basis for their subsequent political mobilisation as untouchables.

17 Bajpai, *Debating Difference*, 32.

18 The 1857 revolt was a major, but ultimately unsuccessful, popular uprising led by the sepoys of the British East India Company's army, against the Company's rule in India. As an armed rebellion, it was one of the greatest challenges to British colonial rule. In the annals of nationalist history, the revolt of 1857 is referred to as the first war of independence from British colonialism.

19 The defence of faiths in India – Hinduism and Islam – against perceived threats of the coloniser's evangelical religion played a crucial role in the great rebellion of 1857. Following the 1857 revolt, in 1858 the East India Company's powers of government were passed directly to the British Crown.

20 For instance, see Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Remaking Custom: The Discourse and Practice of Colonial Codification," in *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in*

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Furthermore, the professed religious neutrality of the colonial state opened up the public sphere for missionary activities by Christian organisations. In response, several Hindu, Muslim and Sikh organisations emerged to resist the Christian missionary project. According to Peter Van der Veer this led to the formation of a public sphere in 19th-century British India that could hardly be called secular.[21] Thus, modernity, colonial knowledge and colonial rule created new epistemic and political conditions for religion-state-society relationships in 19th-century India.

From Religious Groups to Communal Identities

In the first half of the 20th century, contrived binaries between religious and secular, religious minority and the socially backward, tradition and modernity, and state and community congealed to produce seamless monochromatic ideological positions. Two issues were crucial in shaping the new narrative of secularity in the 20th century on the Indian subcontinent: 1) Group-based constitutional reforms under the British colonial rule; and 2) the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movements (1919–1922). The first issue concerns British policies towards Indians in colonial representative institutions which led to a steady expansion of group rights from the late 19th to the mid-20th century and heightened political competition along religious and caste lines. By the early 20th century, one of the main principles governing colonial representation was in place; it was representation of groups as communal interests – commercial, educational, religious etc. – that were seen to comprise Indian society.[22] But by the middle of the century, the term 'communal' had turned into a pejorative category and 'communalism' referred to political mobilisation of religious groups. In order to understand how the term 'communal' came to be associated specifically with political demands of the Muslim community, Shabnum Tejani has traced the debates over constitutional reforms which brought about electoral representation of religious and caste groups in colonial institutions of

Group-based constitutional reforms under the British colonial rule

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Honour of Romila Thapar (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

21 Peter Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 20–24.

22 Bajpai, *Debating Difference*, 31–69.

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representation.[23] One of the first such reforms at the national level was the 1909 Indian Councils Act, famously known as the Morley-Minto reforms. The Morley-Minto reforms instituted separate electorates for Muslims in provincial and national legislatures, which meant that only a Muslim could represent Muslims, or protect Muslim interests. These reforms brought to the fore what came to be known as the 'communal question' – a long-drawn-out contentious debate on group rights in Indian politics (which remained controversial until the partition of India in 1947) over separate and joint electorates as competing modes of electoral representation. The communal question demonstrated how the language of secularity was imbricated with issues of representative politics and evinced what was considered secular versus communal politics. Tejani notes that in 1906 neither perceived religious differences, nor conflicts arising between religious communities, were termed 'communal'. It was also not a term attributed inherently to Muslims. She argues that the debates leading up to the 1909 constitutional reforms shaped and consolidated a narrative, where communalism came to be associated with the behaviour of the Muslim minority, and the term 'communal' came to be imbued with negative connotations such as irrational attachment to pre-modern religious identities. It was during this period that Muslims began to be identified as a 'communal minority' instead of a 'religious community'.[24] Furthermore, prior to 1909 debates, 'minority,' 'special,' or 'communal' interests were not solely defined in terms of numbers, that is, as majorities and minorities. It was in the process of the debates on constitutional reforms that the question of representation shifted from being a qualitative one – as to what it meant to be of 'special interest' or a 'historical' or socially and politically backward community – to a quantitative one, where minority now came to be defined in numerical terms.[25]

Morley-Minto reforms, 1909

As colonial institutions gradually became more representative, group representation expanded. In addition to Muslims, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms in 1919 granted separate electorates and reserved seats to more groups, which included the Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans. In 1931, the Communal Award granted separate electorates to Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians,

Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, 1919

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23   Tejani, *Indian Secularism;* Tejani, "Defining Secularism in Particular."
24   Tejani*, Indian Secularism*, 116.
25   Tejani*, Indian Secularism*, 142–43; also see Tejani, "Defining Secularism in Particular."

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and in a new departure, to the Depressed Classes. The communal award thus recognised the 'Untouchables'[26] or the Depressed Classes as a minority community. Protesting against the communal award, the leader of non-violent national struggle, M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948) declared "a fast unto death" in 1932. For him, such a political mechanism transformed temporary social inequalities into permanent political differences, foreclosing any possibility of reconciliation between the upper castes and the Untouchables.[27] But for the leader of the Untouchables, B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the question of separate electorates was not a matter of principle or a moral issue, but a mechanism to achieve certain ends through state power:[28]

> As far as we are concerned we have no immediate concern other than securing political power […] and that alone is the solution to our problem […] We want our social status raised in the eyes of the savarna[29] Hindus.[30]

The provision for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes proposed in the Communal Award was abandoned as a result of the Gandhi-Ambedkar Poona Pact in 1932, which doubled the number of seats reserved for Untouchables in provincial assemblies, albeit under joint electorates. The Government of India Act, 1935, was the last major constitutional reform in colonial India which provided reserved seats in provincial legislatures for a total of thirteen communal and socio-economic groups (including the Untouchables as per the Poona Pact).[31]

In the debates on minority representation, a political consensus emerged across ideological divisions among religious nationalists like

Government of India Act, 1935

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26 The untouchables were deemed to be the lowest members in the Hindu caste hierarchy. See also fn. 16.

27 Anuradha Veeravalli, *Gandhi in Political Theory: Truth, Law and Experiment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 63.

28 Valerian Rodrigues, "Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly* LII, no. 15 (2017).

29 Savarna refers to the first three of the four castes, that is, Brahman (priest), Kshatriya (warrior/ruler), and the Vaishya (merchant or trader). The Shudra (servant), as the last and lowest members in the caste hierarchy, provides service to the other three varnas.

30 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, "Appendix X: Discussions with B.R. Ambedkar," in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vol. 59 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1933), 509. https://www.gandhiservefoundation.org/about-mahatma-gandhi/collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi/.

31 Bajpai, *Debating Difference*, 31–69.

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Gandhi, Hindu communal organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha (literally, the Great Hindu Organisation),[32] and secular nationalists like Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964, the leader of the Indian national movement and the first prime minister of independent India). Their rejection of group-based representative politics demonstrates that both religio-moral (Gandhi) and secular concerns (Nehru) can easily align with majoritarian concerns (Hindu Mahasabha). For secular nationalists and left-liberals, communal politics bore no relation to modern conditions and problems. Nehru, for instance, considered them essentially economic and political issues: "Religion is both a personal matter and a bond of faith, but to stress religion in matters political and economic is obscurantism […]".[33] Mainstream nationalism projected the Congress as a secular political body which was representative of all sections of the society and, therefore, deemed itself as the only legitimate secular voice of Indian nationalism. But the meaning of 'nation' was variously perceived in the subcontinent, and one of the challenges to this idea as propagated by the Congress came from the communal/minority question. The politics of the communal/minority question sharply pointed out that the so-called inclusive history of Indian nationalism was actually hegemonic. M. A. Jinnah (1876–1948), the leader of the Muslim League, a political organisation in undivided British India, and the founder of Pakistan, sought to represent the interests of Muslims in India; and Ambedkar, who steadfastly refused the subsumption of the Untouchables into the Hindu fold, sought to represent the interests of the Depressed Classes. By the mid-20th century, a dominant narrative of secularity emerged vis-à-vis the question of representative politics. In this discourse, protecting minority community interests through constitutional safeguards (religious, cultural and educational rights) was considered secular politics, but safeguarding those very same interests through group-based representative political measures

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32　Hindu Mahasabha was a Hindu nationalist organisation founded in 1915, with Madan Mohan Malaviya as its leader. For a history of the Mahasabha in its early years, see Richard Gordon, "The Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian National Congress, 1915 to 1926," *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (1975).

33　Jawaharlal Nehru, "The Congress and the Muslims," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 8, ed. Gopal Sarvepalli (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, 1976), 120, https://nehruportal.nic.in/selected-works-jawaharlal-nehru-volume-8#page/162/mode/2up.

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(communal electorates and reservation of seats in legislatures) was seen as communal politics.

A second issue which consolidated the new narrative of secularity in the 20th century is related to the emergence of M. K. Gandhi as a mass leader and his inclusion of religious politics and religious vocabulary in the Indian national movement. Already in the early 20th century, constitutionalism had proved ineffectual in wresting major concessions in representative institutions for Indians from the colonial government. It was at this juncture that Gandhi appeared on the all-India political stage and incorporated the masses into the national struggle with his strategy of non-violent non-cooperation against the British colonial rule. In 1919, Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation movement against the Rowlett Act which sought to permanently impose wartime restrictions of the First World War on civil rights in India. He linked this nation-wide mass campaign to the Khilafat movement which aimed to mobilise Indian Muslims to put pressure on the British government to retain the boundaries of the defeated Ottoman Empire as they had existed before the war in 1914. The movement also sought to preserve the position of the *khalifa* as the temporal head of the Islamic world. The two campaigns soon merged to be part of the same anti-colonial struggle. However, as the Khilafat/Congress alliance began to break down in 1922, violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims erupted across the subcontinent. Many nationalist leaders saw this as a direct result of political mobilisation based on religion,[34] and in the aftermath of the events in 1922, such politics came to be called communalism. Thus post-1922, the terms of the political discourse shifted. Now, legitimate political loyalty towards the Congress and the national movement largely meant a politics based on declared policies and programmes rather than around communitarian affiliations of people. Now only electoral politics based on formal or virtual representation was seen as secular and non-sectarian politics by the Congress. Any demand for mirror representation of communities in the legislative bodies was deemed anti-secular and anti-national

Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movements (1919–22)

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[34] Historians like Tejani have however argued that at the grassroots the Non-Cooperation/Khilfat movement was made up of a complex set of alliances, often little related to religious difference or Indian nationalism. See Shabnum Tejani, "Re-considering Chronologies of Nationalism and Communalism: The Khilafat Movement in Sind and its Aftermath, 1919–1927," *South Asia Research* 27, no. 3 (2007).

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politics. The Nehru report of 1928, delineating Congress's position on constitutional reform, denounced special representation. It must be remembered that, until the 1920s, it was not uncommon to be a member of both the Congress and the Muslim League. Jinnah was a member of the League and the Congress until the end of 1920. The events during the inter-war period brought about a new reversal in nationalist politics, where political mobilisation around communitarian identities for the nationalist struggle was delegitimised as misdirected nationalism. It was considered "divisive, primitive and […] the product of a colonial policy of Divide and Rule".[35] A more radical version of this secularist discourse, where national politics is construed in terms of the universal political category of the citizen and any political demand based on group/minority rights is seen as threatening to national unity, frequently emerges in majoritarian and right-wing Hindu nationalist politics in post-colonial India.

Sarva Dharma Sambhava: An Indian Narrative of Secularity in the 20ᵗʰ Century

The notion of *sarva dharma sambhava* (equality of all religions), which is a cultural and socio-political expression of religious toleration, evinced the dominant narrative of secularity in the 20ᵗʰ century.[36] A version[37] of *sarva dharma sambhava* takes recourse to secular historiography[38] to criticise and reject communalist ideas by

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35 Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997 (1990)), 235.

36 Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr, "Multiple Secularities."

37 The idea of *sarva dharma sambhava* can be construed in multiple ways. For the Gandhian expression of the same, see Ajay Skaria, "No Politics without Religion: of Secularism and Gandhi," in *Political Hinduism: The Religious Imagination in Public Spheres,* ed. Vinay Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

38 Neeladri Bhattacharya has noted that the professional history writing that developed in India in the early decades after independence was influenced by the intellectual culture of the time. He says that, troubled by memories of the communal carnage and trauma of the Partition years — when thousands of Hindus and Muslims killed each other —, the intellectuals of this new India struggled to create a secular and democratic public culture. Inspired by the ideals of democratic citizenship, they hoped for a society where individuals would be emancipated from their religious and affective ties and see themselves as secular citizens of a democratic state. As such, historians turned to the past to counter communal representations of history, question communal stereotypes, and write a secular national history. The critique of communal prejudice was seen as necessary for developing a history that was scientific and objective. To be authentic, it was

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highlighting the pre-colonial past in terms of syncretic and pluralist traditions, and composite cultures. In the nationalist imagination, the idea of composite culture supported two inter-related arguments about secularity and religious toleration in pre-colonial India. Firstly, it was suggested that the presence of composite culture in society exhibited the process whereby new cultural forms emerged that sublimated earlier specifically Hindu or Muslim forms, and therefore it was misleading to call it by a religious proper name.[39] The *Ganga-Jamuni tahzeeb* (Ganga-Yamuna culture), a composite Hindu-Muslim mass culture that developed in North India during the medieval period, was an illustrative example of this living pluralism and syncretism. Secondly, in the mainstream nationalist discourse, the notion of composite culture was also used to depict the pre-colonial situation of habitually peaceable existence of Hindus and Muslims without much persistent hindrance to each other's religious observances, and the appointment of individuals from both communities into administrative positions.[40] This narrative of secularity sought to re-introduce and re-invigorate a proto-secular irenic past of mutual toleration that was ostensibly lost during the 'divide and rule' policy of British colonialism. This idea of religious toleration is also represented in the statist (constitutional) version of Indian secularism which seeks to demonstrate its uniqueness by maintaining that it is not based on the Western notion of separation of religion and politics, but rather on the idea of equal respect for all religions.[41] Mainstream nationalist ideology embodied and disseminated this idea of secularity through the slogan "unity in diversity." Although nationalist leaders sometimes projected an exaggerated argument about India's composite culture,[42] what is important in this narrative is its insistence on the pluralist nature of Indian society. It is this insistence on India's inter- and intra-religious diversity that has increasingly come

Composite culture, religious toleration, and secularity in the nationalist imagination

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believed, this new history had to be both scientific and secular. Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Predicaments of Secular Histories," *Public Culture* 20, no. 1 (2007): 57.

39   Kaviraj, "Religion, Politics and Modernity," 301.

40   Kaviraj, 301.

41   Shefali Jha, "Secularism in the Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946–1950," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 30 (2002).

42   For instance, see Nehru's invocation of the idea of 'composite culture' in The Discovery of India. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1946). For a critical engagement with "unexamined nationalist positions" on the communal question, see Kaviraj, "Religion, Politics and Modernity," 295–316.

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under attack in contemporary India with the dominance of majoritarian and right-wing Hindu nationalist politics. Nationalist leaders, like Gandhi and Nehru, did not think that religious difference was a cause of conflict and hindrance to the nation-building process, and therefore they did not think that Indian nationalism needed to emulate European-style nation-state formation. Mainstream nationalist thinking represented India's religious diversity as its strength. This secular nationalist ideology was not only intended to be unlike European nationalism, but it was intended to prevent the emergence of that form of nationalism in India.[43]

Secularity in Contemporary India

Rise of the Hindu Right in the late 1980s

In post-colonial India, the Hindu Right's ascendency in the socio-political sphere in the late 1980s came alongside a challenge to the secularity narrative and constitutional secularism (also known as Nehruvian secularism) that had been dominant until the 1970s. In this changed socio-political context, it has been suggested that a new element has now entered the arena of what is being regarded as legitimate politics in India:

> It is the idea, now being voiced not from the extremist fringes but from the very center of representative institutions, that the constitutionally guaranteed rights of minorities must be negotiated afresh in the political domain.[44]

In order to convert a multicultural state into a majoritarian one, the right-wing groups in India take recourse to several discourses,[45] which need not be anti-secular to justify a homogenised national polity. That is why critics of secularism in India argue that the political conception of *Hindutva*[46] in the 21st century is unlikely to pit itself against the idea of the secular state.[47] For the right-wing

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43 Akeel Bilgrami, "Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Gandhi, and the contexts of Indian secularism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy,* ed. Jonardon Ganeri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 579.

44 Partha Chatterjee, "The Contradictions of Secularism," chap. 6 in *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

45 The Hindu nationalist party, BJP invokes discourses of development *(vikas)* and security of the nation to persecute Muslims in India.

46 The ideology of the Hindu Right which seeks to establish a hegemony of Hindu national culture and polity.

47 Chatterjee, "Secularism and Toleration," *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no. 28 (1994).

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national party BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party, which translates as Indian People's Party), to uphold constitutional values which protect minority rights (such as religious personal laws) over a uniform civil code (enshrined in the directive principles of the constitution) for all is actually 'pseudo-secular'. The BJP labels such preferential policies, which find support in political parties that are ideologically centrist and left-of-centre, as "minority appeasement", and accuses these parties of treating minority communities, especially Muslims, as vote banks. If in the 20th century, the dominant understanding of secularity was construed in conjunction to notions of diversity and pluralism, in contemporary India it is increasingly being understood in opposition to such ideas.

Conclusion

In post-colonial India, where identity-based politics came to dominate the political scene, it was increasingly being felt that the rise of the Hindu Right in the late 1980s and the communalisation of Indian politics led to the betrayal of the 'Gandhi-Nehru tradition' of a nation built on a 'secular ideal'.[48] The rise of religious intolerance in the country also led scholars to argue that "secularism is dead" in India.[49] While some scholars have blamed the present predicament of increased religious intolerance and a communalised atmosphere in society on an imposition of a Western-style secular order envisioned and practised in the doctrine of secularism,[50] others have defended an 'Indian' conception of secularism that does not adhere to the 'wall of separation' doctrine.[51] A historical examination of narratives of secularity in the Indian subcontinent demonstrates that, by solely focussing on secularism, what may get occluded is the imbrication of various discourses which aid in legitimising or de-legitimising normative ideals. In this companion entry we saw how, in the 20th

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48 P. C. Joshi, "Gandhi-Nehru Tradition and Indian Secularism," *Mainstream,* November 25, 2007, https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article432.html.

49 Ashis Nandy quoted in Tejani, *Indian Secularism,* 1.

50 T. N. Madan, "Secularism in its Place," in *Secularism and its Critics,* ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration," in *Secularism and its Critics,* ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

51 Rajeev Bhargava, "What is Secularism for?," in *Secularism and its Critics,* ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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century, narratives of secularity emerged and consolidated in relation to three reference problems: the (secular) nationalist ideology, representative politics and religious diversity. In conclusion, a discourse, secularity in the present case, does not operate in isolation. To legitimise its vocabulary, it hinges on other available political discourses, such as democracy, secularism, national unity, development, tolerance etc.[52] *Sarva dharma sambhava* is one such narrative in the larger discourse of secularity in India; once dominant, today increasingly marginalised.

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52 Bajpai, for instance, has examined group rights in India by looking at how a range of normative resources, such as secularism, democracy, social justice, national unity, and development, are deployed to justify such rights in India. Bajpai, *Debating Difference.*

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